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Sleeplessness and performance

Managing pressure at work

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We're always told we should make sure we get plenty of sleep in order to work at optimum efficiency. Yet in the age of snatched lunches and 24/7 e-mails and text messages, the conditions for a full night's sleep are increasingly under threat.

One unfortunate factor of sleeplessness is that our critical faculties are centered in the cortex (left-brain), which our body prioritises as last in the queue for glucose — the essential fuel for our performance.

Deprived of sleep, we have more difficulty summoning our critical or creative resources. We are then liable to rely merely on routine solutions suitable only for superficial examination of a problem or brief, and not for in-depth study. Some new research from Duke University suggests the effects may even be more pronounced. It seems the sleep-deprived brain may replicate old decision-paths without noting whether those resulted in a good or bad decision.

I once worked for a major supplier of credit-card scanning software, whose CEO, called Douglas, had made a thorough study of the effects of sleep deprivation at work. He understood the subject so well he could recognise early signs of sleeplessness in his staff, and would offer helpful solutions. It was remarkable how willingly they took his advice, and his department was nearly always ranked as No 1 for performance and staff satisfaction.

Secretive man

Like those employees, I developed a high respect for Douglas. But I did find him to be quite a secretive man. Even after several years, I never felt I really knew him. But he seemed to possess a particular quality that I had come across in the prisoners-of-war I once counselled in Serbia.

Then one day, he unexpectedly confided to me about the moment, early in his career, that had caused him to study sleep deprivation so seriously. I must say it was just about the opposite from what I'd expected.

He told me he had been one of a group of three young railwaymen, who were always lounging around the clubs late in the evening, and were often reprimanded for not getting enough sleep. One night, Douglas had encouraged one of his friends, a train-driver, to stay out into the small hours, when he was due to drive an express the next morning. Sure enough, during the morning rush-hour, that driver misread one of the signals at a main junction — although fortunately the emergency brakes came on just in time to avoid a serious crash.

Douglas really took this to heart, when he thought of how much worse it could have been.

But not surprisingly, his own attitude to work changed overnight.

So that was how Douglas discovered a new purpose in life and became a highly respected manager. And of course, he treated sleep deprivation as his special mission within his department.

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Sleep patterns

Today's work culture tends to upset our natural sleep patterns. Our brain's cognitive faculty is at risk from glucose deprivation. Sleeplessness at work should be a formal managerial study.